
Scrutiny Report to the City Council

Review of Signing Services

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Contents

	Page
1. Preface	3
2. Executive Summary	4
3. Introduction	6
4. Terms of Reference	9
5. Method of Investigation	10
6. Findings	11
7. Recommendations	14
Background Papers	
<u>'Second City or Last City?'</u>	1994
<u>'Time for the Talking to Stop'</u>	2000
European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages	1992
Research into other Local Authorities' signing service provision	2002

1. Preface

By Councillor Sybil Spence
 Chair of the Task and Finish
 Overview & Scrutiny Committee



I am very pleased to be presenting this review at the start of the European Year of Disabled People 2003. I hope the focus that we have given in this review on the needs of the Deaf Community will continue throughout the year on the needs of other people with disabilities

As part of this review we held several formal meetings which involved Council Officers, representatives from the Deaf Community and major service providers across the city.

An informative and lively meeting was held at the Deaf Club in Ladywood which was attended by a significant number of Sign Language Interpreting service users and from this we learnt of the wide range of frustrations and anger within the Deaf Community.

We are also aware that Sign Language Interpreting services for deafblind users are also an issue of concern as it is understood that there are currently in the region of 100+ deafblind people in Birmingham.

We also considered previous reports on signing services in Birmingham, namely: "Second City or Last City?" [1994] and "Time for the Talking to Stop" [2000]. We noted how little progress had been made towards adopting a corporate approach to the provision of Sign Language Interpretation services across the City Council and other key service providers.

In conjunction with the Equalities Division we undertook a survey, which consisted of a questionnaire aimed at service providers in the City Council, statutory and voluntary agencies. We also reviewed the provision of Sign Language Interpreting services by a number of other Local Authorities.

As Chair, I take this opportunity to express appreciation for the contributions made by Matthew Jackson, Neil Patterson, Christine McPherson, and members of the Deaf Club at Ladywood.

In addition, I would thank my fellow Councillors, Cllr Rev. Richard Bashford, Cllr Roy Benjamin, Cllr Len Clarke, Cllr Jane James, Cllr Paul Tilsley. I would also thank Brian Sheperd (BID), Gail Pentherby (BID), John Stonier (Deaf Plus), Janet Fox (South Birmingham PCT), Maria Watson (West Midlands Police) and officers from various City Council departments who contributed to the work of this Committee. Their assistance has enabled us to produce a report, which I feel, reflects a positive move towards responding more appropriately to Birmingham's Deaf Community.

Sybil Spence

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The objective of the review was to examine current provision of Sign Language Interpreting services for deaf and deafblind users in Birmingham. The remit included a review of City Council and other major service providers in the city.
- 2.2 From the work of the Committee the following key areas were identified as requiring attention and further action:
- 2.3. That a single central unit within the City Council is established to:
 - 2.3.1 Arrange for provision of Sign Language Interpreting services throughout the City Council and its departments based upon an agreed set of service standards.
 - 2.3.2 Monitor the quality of all Sign Language Interpreting services provided in conjunction with service users.
 - 2.3.3 Work with the Social Services Department to develop reliable information on the numbers of deaf and deafblind people in Birmingham in accord with the requirements of the National Assistance Act 1948.
 - 2.3.4 Arrange for the regular monitoring of all of the communication systems employed by the City Council which could be utilised by deaf people e.g. textphones, videophones, type-talk, email etc.
 - 2.3.5 Provide quarterly statistics to Council on improvements to the Sign Language Interpreting services in Birmingham to the City Council and the Deaf Community. These reports to include information from the Social Services Department regarding the number of people registered as deaf or deafblind in Birmingham.
- 2.4 That proposals are developed to provide deaf equality and communication skills training for all staff, priority being given to front line staff and senior management.
- 2.5 That British Sign Language (BSL) be recognised as a 'Community Language', in line with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and that a formal statement of this be issued to the Deaf Community and the community at large during the European Year of Disabled People 2003.
- 2.6 That Birmingham City Council works with the Deaf Community to establish a consortium of service providers to plan, pool and improve the quality of Sign Language Interpreting services across the City. This work should include a review of the use of possible technological innovations (e.g. video-phones, multi-media, text messaging etc) and be implemented with

a view to detailed proposals being made, at the latest, by the end of the European Year of Disabled People 2003.

- 2.7 That the Education and Lifelong Learning Department prepare a fully costed strategy to explore the wider usage of BSL in all schools. Thus recognising the right of all deaf and hearing impaired children to learn through their first language. In addition, that BSL be offered in schools to the hearing community, giving hearing children the opportunity to learn BSL as a second language and thereby promoting inclusion.
- 2.8 That the Education and Lifelong Learning Department develop plans to provide deaf adults with the opportunities to participate fully in one or more aspect of community life (e.g. Parent Evenings, Parent/Teacher Associations, Adult Education, etc.).
- 2.9 That the Social Services Department be required to report quarterly on the number of people registered as deaf or deafblind.

3. Introduction

- 3.1 People who are deaf or deafblind fall within the definitions of disability as given by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA 1995).
- 3.2 Section 21 (1) of the DDA 1995 places a duty on service providers to make adjustments:

“where a provider of services has a practice, policy or procedure which makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled persons to make use of a service which he provides, or is prepared to provide, to other members of the public, it is his duty to take such steps as it is reasonable, in all the circumstances of the case, for him to have to take in order to change that practice, policy or procedure so that it no longer has that effect.”

This duty would apply in responding to deaf and deafblind service users.

- 3.3 Under Section 29 of the National Assistance Act 1948, local authorities "are required to compile and maintain classified registers of persons who are blind, deaf or dumb and other persons who are substantially and permanently handicapped by illness, injury or congenital deformity." In Birmingham this is the responsibility of the Social Services Department which has entered into a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Birmingham Institute for the Deaf to maintain such a register with regard to deaf and deafblind people in the city. This data base was revised in 2000 in discussion with Social Services to collect information which would hopefully, in time, better inform the commissioning process. It takes time to build up any data base and information from the previous one is not always sufficiently detailed to transfer to the new one. The new database includes where possible name, level of hearing impairment, ward of city, age and ethnicity.

The current statistics show

Profoundly deaf (no speech)	487
Profoundly deaf (with speech)	180
Hard of Hearing	1419
Other / Not Known	85
	2171

- 3.4 However registration for people with hearing impairment is voluntary and unlike for those people registered as 'blind' there is no apparent benefit to being registered. In 2001 only 194,840 people in England were registered

with their Social Services departments as deaf or hard of hearing. As there are estimated to be more than 7 million people with some degree of hearing loss in England and up to 8.7 million in the UK, it is clear that these registers are a very poor guide.

British Sign Language

- 3.5 The British Deaf Association (BDA) estimates that British Sign Language (BSL) is the preferred language of between 50,000 and 70,000 people. It is a language of space and movement using hands, body, face and head. Many thousands of hearing people also use BSL. Contrary to popular belief sign language is not international and wherever Communities of Deaf people exist, sign languages develop. As with spoken languages these vary from country to country and are not based on the spoken language in the country of origin.
- 3.6 People in the Deaf Community come from many backgrounds but they share a sense of experience, culture, history and commitment. The Deaf Community sees itself as a linguistic and cultural minority.
- 3.7 The British Deaf Association was established in 1890 and campaigns for the right of deaf people to use BSL, to be educated in BSL and to access information and services through BSL. The Association and its members believe this is the most effective way for deaf people to participate in society on an equal footing with the hearing population.
- 3.8 At the heart of the British Deaf Association's campaigning activities is the desire for official recognition of BSL because of the belief that this is an essential step in asserting and protecting the Deaf Community. The BDA calls on the government to recognise BSL under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages as this would ensure fuller access for deaf people to public services and information, education, social and economic life, the justice system, broadcasting and cultural life. It would also promote greater study of and research into the language and enhance the status of BSL as one of the UK's most widely used indigenous languages.

Interpreting Services

- 3.9 A sign language interpreter can provide an important link between deaf and hearing people and in particular can assist in access to services. However nationally there is currently a serious shortage. As of July 2000 there were only approximately 100 qualified interpreters and approximately 200 trainee interpreters registered with the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People. The growth of demand for interpreters has not been matched by supply and this is a major obstacle to deaf people's social inclusion.
- 3.10 It is uncertain how many people there are in Birmingham who use BSL. However, national predictions based on the SSI formula in "A Service in

the Edge” 1997 would indicate that there are about 5000 BSL users in Birmingham although this figure may be higher based on local demography. From the involvement of deaf service users in the work of the Committee, it has become clear that there is a strong and vibrant Deaf Community in Birmingham.

Background

- 3.11 During 1994 The Birmingham and Solihull Deaf Advocacy Group (BASDAG) sought funding to undertake an independent review into Sign Language Interpreting provision and communication support services for deaf and deafblind people in Birmingham and Solihull. The findings of this review were drawn together in the report “Second City or Last City?” [1994]. The report acknowledged the wide range of needs for different types of communication support services for deaf, deafened, hard of hearing and deafblind people and the patchy availability and quality of interpreting services available locally. It also pointed out the national shortage in supply of suitably qualified sign language and communications workers.
- 3.12 A key message in the report was the need for an "independent Communication Support Unit to be established to facilitate comprehensive access between deaf and hearing people." It was recommended that such a "service should be accessible, have high quality standards and incorporate choice and involvement of deaf people."
- 3.13 In 2000 the Social Services Departments in Birmingham City Council and Solihull MBC commissioned a follow up report to review BSL/English interpreting and communication services for deaf people in Birmingham and Solihull. “Time for the Talking to Stop” [2000]. The remit of this report was to collect national data and record developments in signed interpreting and communications support since 1994, to gather information on local services in Birmingham and Solihull and to produce a report with alternative models for interpreting and communication service provision. The overriding finding of this report was that deaf people want and feel that they have a right to quality Sign Language Interpreting and other communication services when they need to access Council services.
- 3.14 A Task and Finish Overview and Scrutiny Committee was set up in recognition of the need to assess City Council progress in responding to the communication support services needs of the Deaf Community. This comprised:

Councillor Sybil Spence (Chair)

Councillor Reverend Richard Bashford

Councillor Roy Benjamin

Councillor Len Clark

Councillor Jane James

Councillor Keith Linnecor

Councillor Paul Tilsley

In addition Matthew Jackson, Neil Patterson and Christine McPherson were invited to attend the Committee meetings as representatives of deaf people in the City.

4. Terms of Reference

- 4.1 The review focussed on assessing the current provision and quality of Sign Language Interpreting and communication support services available to the Deaf Community through Birmingham's public agencies. The key objectives of the exercise were to gain an understanding of previous and current barriers to positive change and to make proposals for remedial action to enable deaf service users to access a more responsive service from public agencies.

5. Method of Investigation

A variety of methods of investigation were employed as follows:

Within Birmingham City Council

- 5.1 A questionnaire on the provision of Sign Language Interpreting services within the City Council was circulated to all Departments and representatives were invited to the meetings of the Committee.

Other Agencies/Service Providers in Birmingham

- 5.2 Similarly, the questionnaire and an invitation to be involved in the work of the Committee was extended to voluntary and statutory agencies. It was noted that the West Midlands Police reported that it had a significant policy of training officers and others in BSL.

National Research

- 5.3 A significant number of local authorities were reviewed in relation to their policies and practices on the provision of Sign Language Interpreting services. This was undertaken by:

5.3.1 Despatch (via e-mail) of questionnaire to other local authorities.

5.3.2 Review of information on Sign Language Interpreting services provided on selected local authority sites.

5.3.3 Direct personal contact with a number of officers in other local authorities.

5.3.4 An Officer visit to the Manchester Deaf Centre.

6. Findings

The Deaf Community in Birmingham

- 6.1 As indicated earlier in this report there is no clear picture of how many people there are in Birmingham who might require access to Sign Language Interpreting services or what the nature of their required communication service might be.
- 6.2 The Birmingham Deaf Community has a base at the Deaf Club in Ladywood.

Feedback from the Deaf Community

- 6.3 Representations made by the Deaf Community reveal considerable frustration and anger at the lack of any significant progress since the publication of the two reports "Second City or Last City?" [1994] and "Time for the Talking to Stop" [2000].
- 6.4 Members of the Deaf Community are also angry that their significant input into these consultative processes appears to have been ignored.
- 6.5 The experience of deaf service users in communicating with the City Council and other service providers remains one of frequent and continued frustration. Deaf people face many barriers when making use of public and private services and these are often due to a lack of awareness of the needs of deaf people on the part of service providers and insufficient or inadequate communications support. Deaf people with visual impairments or other disabilities are especially disadvantaged.
- 6.6 From their perspective, current access to Sign Language Interpreting services is poor and the quality of the provision is variable. When it is made available, there are usually significant delays in the delivery of a service. In addition the service user has no input into how or when the service is provided and no opportunity to feed back on the service received.
- 6.7 The service user should be the prime consideration when Sign Language Interpreting services are provided. An example was given of a deaf woman who, whilst giving birth, was provided with a Sign Language Interpreter who was male, causing her acute embarrassment.
- 6.8 Significant concerns were also expressed about how the Council utilises and responds to possible technological innovations aimed at supporting deaf and hard of hearing service users such as textphone communication. The Deaf Community frequently finds that advertised textphone numbers are not answered or monitored for calls. Where they are, it is often by a person inadequately trained to communicate effectively using a textphone.

It is vital that textphone enquiries are dealt with by staff with the appropriate skills and training.

- 6.9 Despite the two reports previously detailed earlier in this report, there is a perception that little has changed over time, in terms of the way the City Council and other service providers respond to the requirements of the Deaf Community.
- 6.10 The Deaf Community considers that their rights under both European and UK legislation are being ignored.

Findings within Birmingham City Council

- 6.11 City Council Departments fund the provision of Sign Language Interpreting services from their departmental budgets or from the residual budgetary contributions made in establishing the Accessible Information Service at the Brasshouse Centre.
- 6.12 The Accessible Information Service currently provides a variety of services to departments including advice on producing accessible information for visually impaired and deaf service users and a booking system for Sign Language Interpreters.
- 6.13 However there is inconsistency between departments in how and when they provide access to Sign Language Interpreting services. There is also a lack of understanding in some departments about where to access these services. Thus, a variety of agencies and/or individuals providing interpreting services are used and there is no oversight of the nature, effectiveness and quality of the service
- 6.14 Any monitoring undertaken of the service provided does not involve feedback from the person receiving the service. The outcome of any monitoring is not being corporately shared, for example, through the Accessible Information Service.

Feedback from other Authorities

- 6.15 When the need for a Sign Language Interpreter has been identified, many local authorities utilise the services of an organisation of/for deaf people (such as the Birmingham Institute for the Deaf) or contract a private agency or individual qualified interpreter to provide session interpreting.
- 6.16 A number of informative Local Authority web-site examples were identified. The London Borough of Barking, for instance, have a video of a Sign Language Interpreter communicating on their main website.
- 6.17 In the main, where information was identified or provided, the primary focus was BSL provision.

Recognising BSL as a Community Language

- 6.18 As indicated earlier in this report, there is a strongly argued campaign for recognition of BSL as a community language as this would be a first step in demonstrating commitment to fully involving the Deaf Community in the affairs of the city. This step would give a considerable boost to the confidence of the Deaf Community. Manchester City Council and the Greater London Assembly have already given BSL such recognition.

Conclusions

- 6.19 There is much that can be done to improve access to City Council and other public services by the Deaf Community. This review has enabled the Task and Finish Committee to identify a series of key actions that could make a significant contribution towards achieving this long-term goal. These include establishing a central resource to act as the primary facility for use by all City Council departments, in relation to both booking requests for Sign Language Interpreting services, setting and monitoring service standards and providing staff training in relation to all other communications systems used by deaf people. In addition, the City Council needs to consider how it can promote greater inclusiveness in schools for both deaf pupils and deaf parents. The Committee also concluded that the greatest impact across the city could be achieved by the City Council working with other service providers to jointly plan and pool resources to improve the provision of communication services to the Deaf Community.
- 6.20 However it is clear that more work needs to be done and it is essential that once this framework is adopted, that it is clearly owned and driven by a dedicated working group comprising senior officers, partners and representatives of the Deaf Community.

7 Recommendations

- 7.1 That a Working Group be established, comprising members, officers, partners and relevant users, including representatives from the Deaf Community to drive and oversee the development and implementation of the actions set out in paragraphs 7.2 to 7.8 below and to ensure that all proposals are fully costed.
- 7.2 That the Accessible Information Service at the Brasshouse Centre be identified as the primary corporate unit for:
 - 7.2.1 Arranging for provision of Sign Language Interpreting services throughout the City Council and its departments based upon an agreed set of service standards.
 - 7.2.2 Monitoring the quality of all Sign Language Interpreting services provided and doing so in conjunction with service users.
 - 7.2.3 Working with the Social Services Department to develop reliable information on the numbers of deaf and deafblind people in Birmingham in accord with the requirements of the National Assistance Act 1948.
 - 7.2.4 Arranging for the regular monitoring of all of the communication systems employed by the City Council which are utilised by deaf people e.g. textphones, videophones, typetalk, e-mail etc.
 - 7.2.5 Providing quarterly statistics to Council on improvements to the Sign Language Interpreting services in Birmingham to the City Council and the Deaf Community. These reports to include information from the Social Services Department regarding the number of people registered as deaf or deafblind in Birmingham.
- 7.3 That proposals be developed to provide deaf equality and communication skills training for all staff, priority being given to front line staff and senior management.
- 7.4 That British Sign Language (BSL) be recognised as a 'Community Language', in line with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and that a formal statement of this be issued to the Deaf Community and the community at large during the European Year of Disabled People 2003.
- 7.5 That Birmingham City Council works with the Deaf Community to establish a consortium of service providers to plan, pool and improve the quality of Sign Language Interpreting services across the City. This work should include a review of the use of possible technological innovations (e.g. video-phones, multi-media, text messaging etc) and be implemented with

a view to detailed proposals being made, at the latest, by the end of the European Year of Disabled People 2003.

- 7.6 That the Education and Lifelong Learning Department prepare a fully costed strategy to explore the wider usage of BSL in all schools. Thus recognising the right of all deaf and hearing impaired children to learn through their first language. In addition, that BSL be offered in schools to the hearing community, giving hearing children the opportunity to learn BSL as a second language and thereby promoting inclusion.
- 7.7 That the Education and Lifelong Learning Department develop plans to provide deaf adults with the opportunities to participate fully in one or more aspect of community life (e.g. Parent Evenings, Parent/Teacher Associations, Adult Education, etc.).
- 7.8 That the Social Services Department be required to report quarterly on the number of people registered as deaf or deafblind. Such reports to be included in the quarterly reports of the Accessible Information Service (see 7.2.5 above).